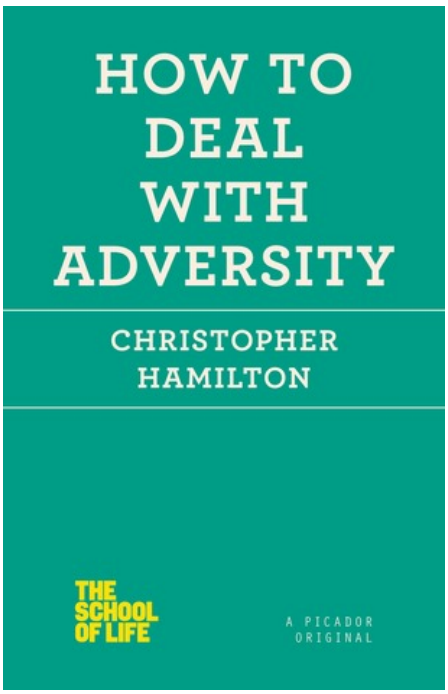

How to Deal with Adversity

Christopher Hamilton

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No matter how insulated we are by wealth or friends, we can all expect to undergo some form of loss, failure, or disappointment. The common reaction is to bear it as best we can—some do this better than others—and move on with life. Dr. Christopher Hamilton proposes a different response to adversity. Focusing on the arenas of family, love, illness, and death, he explores constructive ways to deal with adversity and embrace it to derive unique insight into our condition. In *How to Deal with Adversity*, offering examples from history, literature, and science, Hamilton suggests how we might recognize it as a precious source of enlightenment, shaping our very existence.

How to Deal with Adversity Details

Date	:	Published September 2nd 2014 by Picador (first published January 1st 2014)
ISBN	:	9781250059000
Author	:	Christopher Hamilton
Format	:	Paperback 224 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Philosophy, Psychology, Self Help

From Reader Review How to Deal with Adversity for online ebook

Aruna Samatova says

nothing yet

Yizhen says

I noticed that some of the bad reviews commented about how Christopher didn't bring up actionable steps to his list of greatest/most common adversity in life. In his defense, he did disclaimed that this book is not about solutions but an intention to introduce new thoughts to the reader from interesting perspectives that actually were not naturally thought about but makes sense. This is an example of an attitudinal effort to pick up skills and knowledge, and if i understand correctly, it is based on the assumption that the solutions will come customized to each individual when you gain something from the training.
On the basis that he is meant to introduce new thoughts and ideas, I think this is a great compilation of perspectives accompanied with analogies for illustration. I think he did a great job.
This could be an ebook issue, but I thought the organisation of content could have been much better. Anecdotes and analogies are just splashed everywhere without enough order, and this really affected my personal experience of reading this. book.. Also, I was surprised that the idea of self worth, identity and achievements was not talked about in detail in this book, which could have enlightened many in our current generation.

Nastaran vafaie says

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Shelley says

This is a relatively short book and has a narrow focus on adversity in the specific contexts of family, love, illness, and death. However, it goes relatively deep within those areas.

The author is British and has a relatively broad perspective that includes literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. This book is much better than most of the typical simplistic self-help books one is likely to find in the United States.

I disagree with one of the other reviewers here who claims that this book is just a bunch of quotes. That is not true. That reviewer must have just skimmed the book. There are quotes, but they are in context to illustrate some very complicated explanations and descriptions.

This book would be good for someone who wants more than just a book of quotes and who wants more than the typical simplistic self-help book. This book would be good for someone in high school or college who is contemplating going to graduate school for the study of philosophy or psychology. If you read this book and it intrigues you to want more, then you will do well in graduate school.

Hedieh Madani says

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Bryan says

Had some good perspectives, but the writing style was driving me nuts, very clunky.

Parham says

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Ms. Reader says

I received this book from Goodreads First Reads. It was a pleasant little book, filled with tiblets of inspiring and motivational quotes and advice. Though I so feel like it could've followed through with it's title a bit better, especially considering the length of the book, and provided a more insightful self-help guide on how to actually deal with adversity, it was nonetheless a darling little read.

Golakoo says

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Sean Liu says

Do not think that the person who seeks to console you lives untroubled and in accord with the simple and quiet words that sometimes help you. His life has much hardship and sadness, and remains far behind yours. If it were otherwise, he could never have found those words. —R.M. Rilke, Letter to Franz Kappus, 12 August 1904

This hunger is expressed in the workings of the imagination. It is because we are imaginative creatures that we can construct ideas and images of what the future might be like, formulate plans, initiate change and so on. We can see how things could be different, and, in our hunger, we reach out to make things correspond to the image we have: it might be that we want to buy something, or travel somewhere, or visit a friend, or learn something new, or change career – and so on, in countless ways. But because the mind is so hungry we find that once we achieve our goal we remain hungry: we want more of the same, or something different – or, paradoxically, both. This is why Plato saw human beings as like leaky buckets: pour the water in and, rather than staying put, it will flow out of the bottom. We can never be 'full', in this sense, more than momentarily. Other thinkers have followed Plato, changing the metaphor, seeing us as on a treadmill of desire, forever turning round and never coming to a halt.

The truth to which these reflections point is that we never grow up. We are always potentially capable of slipping back into the mode of behaviour of the child who stamps his feet in anger and frustration because he does not get what he wants from his parents. I was reminded of this recently when I saw a bickering couple at a railway station, on the opposite platform. Shouting at each other, they were evidently extremely angry with each other, and then she walked away from him, down the platform: 'I don't give a damn about you!' was her message. He trailed after her, yelling at her all the while. I remembered times when, as a child, I would walk away from my mother in this way, damning her and yet needing her to follow after me, and I saw in this couple the repetition of a child's reaction to his or her parent. And we have all, in various ways, been one member of that couple, walking off or standing watching as the other departs, aware of the idiocy of what we are doing and yet seemingly incapable of stopping ourselves from doing it. Perhaps that is the key point: we should never forget our own idiocy. We should remember how absurd we are, because by doing so we might be better able to manage those moments in which we regress to the condition of children. We should try to laugh at our own idiocies – that might well diffuse those situations in which, like the couple at the station, we spoil things for ourselves and others and achieve nothing. We always secretly believe that we are the tragic hero of our own conflicts. But think of yourself as a jester instead. Then you might find that you achieve a better balance between what you want from another person and what you actually get from him or her.

I would like to ask you, … to the extent that I can, to try to have patience with all the unresolved things in your heart, to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms and books written in a very strange language. Do not strive for answers which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And it really is a matter of living everything. Live your questions now. (Briefe an einen jungen Dichter: 30–1)
you should try to do what Rilke suggests. Try to open your eyes to the endless extraordinary sights of the natural world; we go round most of the time in a kind of routine, dazed as to what is there. But the plants, trees, animals, sky, sea, and so on are there to be seen, marvellous in their utter gratuity. If we open our eyes, we might be able to be consoled for the pain we carry within us. And if we are consoled in this way, we may be reconciled to the sense of disappointment or loss or hurt we might have concerning our parents. They, after all, gave us this life. It is thanks to them that we can marvel at the world at all.

Since at least the time of Socrates and Plato in the fifth and fourth century BC, romantic love has been identified as a form of madness or intoxication.

It is too good to be true. And if you want to avoid some of the disappointments of love, you should be as coolly realistic about what eros is as it is possible to be. In Love, Stendhal sought to understand, and at the same time overcome, his unrequited love for Mathilde Dembowski. He had met and fallen in love with her in 1818, but she never returned his love, and the more insistent he became, the further she retreated from him. In his book, he formulated one of the most acute insights into the nature of romantic love. He called it the

process of crystallization. If you love a woman, Stendhal writes, you take pleasure in endowing her with a thousand perfections … In the end you overrate her as utterly magnificent, as something fallen from Heaven, whom you do not know but is sure to be yours. If you leave a lover with his thoughts for twenty-four hours, this is what you will find: At the salt mines of Salzburg, they throw a small leafless wintry branch into the depths of the abandoned excavation. Two or three months later they pull it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals. The smallest twigs, no bigger than the claw of a titmouse, are studded with an infinity of dazzling and shimmering diamonds. The original branch can no longer be recognized.

It is well-known, for example, that perfectly average-looking people can seem wildly appealing, even beautiful, on account of the material goods they own or their profession. In such cases, the imagination is excited by the trappings surrounding a person, rather than anything about what he or she is really like, and, so to speak, the imagination mistakes the person, investing him or her with the glow of these trappings. Indeed it is extremely likely that there would be no such thing as romantic love without a large contribution from the imagination, which invests in the beloved a tangled mass of hopes, longings, desires, needs and fears which may have little to do with the person in question. And the difficulty is not so much that the imagination plays a role in romantic love as that it can blind one to what is going on. Stendhal comments:
From the moment he is in love, the wisest man no longer sees anything as it really is. He underrates his own qualities, and overrates the least favours granted by his beloved. Hopes and fears at once become romantic and wayward. (De l'amour: 55)

Stendhal is offering a kind of therapy applied to romantic love. The aim is not to stop us ever feeling it – it would be absurd to embark on such a project anyway – but to enable us to cope better with its disappointments. He says: if your love for another is unrequited or is full of pain, then remember that, especially in its early stages, it is a kind of madness, something that at least partially blinds you both to the nature of your beloved and to your own condition. If you can do this, you might, with luck, be able to gain a certain kind of distance from it. Another way of coping with disappointment in love is to make the pain part of your deeper understanding of life. I have a friend who went through a period in which he had more than his fair share of unsuccessful love affairs. He often felt wretched and miserable. But gradually I understood that there was something willed by him in his various liaisons, because he knew that by embarking upon them he was feeding his curiosity about the human scene. There was a way in which he wanted to affirm all things, good and bad, and these relationships were one route to that. Jean-Paul Sartre was like this too. He wrote in his war diaries:
It seems to me that, at this moment, I am grasping myself in my most essential structure: in this kind of desolate greed to see myself feel and suffer … in order to know all 'natures' – suffering, pleasure, being-in-the-world. It is precisely me, this continuous, introspective reduplication; this avid haste to put myself to good use; this scrutiny. I know it – and often I'm weary of it. That's the source of the magical attraction dark, drowning women have for me. (The War Diaries: November 1939–March 1940: 62)
There is something deeply admirable about such a stance. For sure, you have to be pretty stoical to see things this way, and you will run the risk of destruction if you live like this, but if you can see unrequited love or disappointment in love as a window onto the varieties of human experience, and to that extent as something to be welcomed, you will certainly learn something valuable about yourself and about life, and that itself will help make sense of the pain.

One of the central illusions from which we suffer in love is to suppose that we choose our beloved. We often contrast this with family relationships: you cannot choose your family, we think, but you can choose your friends and those you love. It is partly because we think this that we can often suffer from very unproductive guilt when things go wrong in a romantic relationship. 'If I have chosen to be with this person,' so the thought goes, 'I really ought to be able to make it work, and if I cannot, if we cannot, then it is right to feel guilt and shame.' In one way or another, implicitly or explicitly, such thoughts often haunt those who have to

live with the consequences of a failed romantic relationship. But I think that it is largely an illusion that we choose those whom we love. Apart from the fact that it is more or less completely a matter of chance whom one meets anyway, the truth is that the reasons we are attracted to someone else in the first place are deeply mysterious. We are much less in control here than we like to suppose. A person of kindness and virtue, in whom we find nothing to which to object, can leave us indifferent or cold from a romantic point of view, whereas someone else who is without these virtues may, for reasons that are almost completely unclear, appeal to us profoundly.

What we need so often is to see the other as we first saw him or her, and this is one reason why Alain, in his short essay on the life of the couple in his Thoughts on Happiness, proposes that one solution to such problems in life might well be to spend time, as a couple, with others. Being with others means that we must be polite, he suggests, and this itself works positively to dissipate negative emotions. Moreover, the company of others occupies the mind and distracts from a destructive self-indulgence. 'This is why', he adds, 'one must always be fearful for a couple that is too isolated and depends only on love' (Propos sur le bonheur: 92–3). Clearly, what Alain has in mind is that, in company, you see your partner more as you did when you first got to know him or her, and this can remind you of what you liked so much about that person in the first place. If love is conditional, then nurture the conditions; do not seek to cultivate a love that can dispense with them.

'When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools' says King Lear.

One magnificent exploration of such complacency is Ingmar Bergman's film Scenes from a Marriage. Johan and Marianne have what seems to be a perfect marriage: two beautiful children, successful careers, money – the lot. But the seeds of destruction are clear from the first scene, in which Johan boasts of his intelligence and sensitivity, and a later scene in which they clearly take themselves to be hard-nosed realists when it comes to themselves, their life, and their marriage. They obviously think themselves above their friends Peter and Eva, who quarrel violently over dinner when they visit. But it is this very complacency that destroys them. They gradually realize that they are no better than anyone else; they are just as weak, vulnerable and unsure about their lives as others. They are, in a word, just as foolish – Bergman calls them 'emotionally illiterate'. It is good fortune rather than any great talent or intelligence on their part that has kept them together. This is not to say that you do not need to work to make a relationship thrive or that talent and intelligence cannot help in this regard. But it is to say that a more helpful attitude is one of gratitude: to be grateful is to acknowledge the large residue of mystery in whatever it is that makes love endure. And Johan and Marianne do not see this. They think they have what they have by right. To think that is to run the risk of the kind of complacency that destroys them.
So one of the things necessary to keep love thriving is a healthy sense of one's own foolishness, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. This is not a matter of self-criticism or the desire to reduce oneself in one's own eyes. It is rather a matter of cultivating the capacity to laugh at oneself. It is a willingness to acknowledge that one knows much less than one thinks one does about what is good for one's beloved. It is a matter of acknowledging how little one understands anyone else – especially, perhaps, the person one loves – and resisting the impulse to criticize what that person thinks or feels. 'All of us are inconsiderate and imprudent, all unreliable, dissatisfied, ambitious … corrupt,' as the Roman philosopher Seneca reminds us pithily. 'Therefore, whatever fault he censures in another man, every man will find it residing in his own heart' ('On Anger': 40).

Aristotle distinguished three bases for friendship: utility, pleasure and shared virtue or goodness. Some friendships, he said, are a matter of the friends being useful to each other, as in the friendship between colleagues, or between the client and the provider of a service – say, between you and the architect you employ to renovate your house. The second type of friendship is based on shared pleasure, as in those, for

example, who enjoy sports together. The final type of friendship is, says Aristotle, the best: it is the 'complete friendship … of good people similar in virtue' (Nicomachean Ethics: 1156b, 6). And it is the best, he says, because, unlike the other two forms of friendship, which dissolve if the utility or pleasure no longer exists, it is enduring. Moreover, its great value is evident in that each friend cares about the other for the other's sake, and not simply on account of what he or she can provide by way of utility or pleasure. This third type of friendship is also itself useful and contains pleasure, so it is a kind of synthesis of all that is good in the other two forms.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer recounts a fable in which he compares human beings to porcupines. On a cold day, the porcupines huddled together for warmth, but, in doing so, hurt each other with their spines. So they moved apart, but in this way became cold again. Human beings, says Schopenhauer, are like this: we crave the warm intimacy of closeness with others, especially in romantic love, but, once we get it, we can end up hurting each other through that very closeness. That can engender many conflicting emotions, perhaps the most common of which, and the most likely therefore to damage a relationship, are anger and jealousy.

To all this we may add Seneca's advice about seeking to know one's own limits so that one does not take on tasks that are overly demanding; failure will otherwise be likely and anger the probable consequence. In the situation of romantic love, the point is helpful: do not expect yourself to give more than you can. This is not a plea for laziness, of course, but for a realistic sense of who we are. I once asked a friend, who has been in a healthy relationship for the best part of thirty years, what the secret was. He answered: 'Low expectations'. That could be interpreted as miserably cynical, but it was not. He was being realistic – not only about what the relationship could give him, but also about what he could give to the relationship. Doing moral press-ups is much more difficult than physical ones, and usually leads to disaster. As the French essayist Montaigne put it, if you seek to fly like an angel you will crash all the more violently to earth.

The Limits of Love

In Corinthians, Paul presents love as universal in its power: it never fails, he insists. But he is wrong. It does. You can love someone you do not like; you can stop loving someone you do like; you and your partner can still love each other but be unable to be together. Love is just one aspect of a relationship, and by itself it is not enough to make a success of things. But part of the problem lies in what one counts as success and failure. We see the end of a relationship as a failure, but this is not necessarily the best way to think of things. Of course, no one can deny that when things come to an end, however they do, it is usually extremely painful for one of the partners or both. But I am not convinced that things are as clear-cut as we often suppose them to be. A friend of mine told me that, though he was divorced, he did not really have the sense that he had 'married the wrong woman', as the clichéd phrase has it. In part, this was because he had had children with this woman, and nothing was more important to him than they were. Beyond that, he was puzzled by the idea that he could think of his ex-wife as 'the wrong woman', because it seemed to presuppose that there might have been, or might be, the 'right woman' somewhere: a woman with whom he would experience no difficulties whatsoever. But, he said to me, this is not so: his current relationship might be better than his marriage was, but this does not show that he 'had got it wrong' before, except in the obvious sense that the marriage ended. With his ex-wife he had had good and bad times, highs and lows – but all of that, he said, was his life. And though he might regret certain aspects of his life, he could not regret the whole thing. My friend's sense of the end of his marriage expressed, I think, a kind of fierce attachment to his own life as something uniquely valuable, not despite, but because of all its errors. There is wisdom in such a view and, if you are going through the loss of a loved one, you might find that reflecting on it helps a little: if not now, then at some later point, with luck and hard work, you might be able to see things in this way.

'You are not dying because you are ill; you are dying because you are alive. Death kills you perfectly well

without the aid of illness’ (‘De l’experience’: 302).

We should, he says, deprive death of its strangeness by thinking about it often, including when we are enjoying ourselves, and he writes approvingly of the ancient Egyptians, who ‘in the midst of their banquets and celebrations … would bring a skeleton in to serve as a warning to their guests’. He tells us also that we should, like him, when we are reading or chatting to people, find out how different individuals died, in order to model ourselves on those who died well. ‘Whoever taught men how to die would teach them how to live’, he comments in his typically laconic manner. What Montaigne has in mind is the idea we have already encountered that life itself is deeply bound up with death, in the sense that the whole of life is a progression towards death. ‘[The] being which you enjoy is a part equally of death and life,’ he writes, and forms part of the ‘interweaving of things’ in nature. Because we are always dying whilst alive, all ‘that you live, you rob from life, living at her expense’ (‘Que philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir’: 131–138). We should see ourselves, Montaigne suggests, as part of the cycle of life and death, and be willing to relinquish gracefully what has only been loaned to us, so to speak.

Susie says

This book is pure gold. More about it and how it came into my life:
https://li.st/l/5wP4lokTEWXtM2llYYDSqz

Alice Désirée says

Uma ótima forma de acalmar seus ânimos quanto às expectativas que criamos sobre a vida.

Carol says

Excellent erudite and well written philosophical book about the ways in which philosophers, writers and artists, among them Montaigne, Kafka, Primo Levy, Tolstoy and Johnson have grappled with adversity in life through sickness, love and death. An invigorating, easy read and I will follow up on some of his sources. Great bibliography--check it out. There's a lot to learn and some excellent resources. A delight.

Narges Salmanizadeh says

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Sarah says

This is my third School of Life read - after reading How to Stay Sane and How to Choose a Partner last year - and I enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed the others. The author gives advice on how to deal with adversity in family life, love, illness and death, and provides ideas to back up his points from philosophers such as Montaigne, Proust, Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf and John Updike. This book really reminded me of How Proust Can Change Your Life in some aspects, which was definitely not a bad thing. I'll make sure to check out more SoL books after this, it seems like they published quite a few new ones at the end of last year.